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73 Proprietor: **NATIONAL RESEARCH
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**
101 Newington Causeway
London SE1 6BU (GB)

72 Inventor: **Graham, Neil Bonnette**
6 Kilmardinney Grove
Bearsden Dunbartonshire Scotland (GB)

74 Representative: **Colmer, Stephen Gary et al**
Patent Department National Research
Development Corporation 101 Newington
Causeway
London SE1 6BU (GB)

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Description

This invention relates to the preparation of hydrogels in particulate form.

In many applications to which gels are put it is more convenient that they be in particulate form.

- 5 Conventionally, such particulate gels are prepared by an emulsion or suspension polymerisation process in which, however, there are separation and liquid handling problems. Bulk polymerisation processes, where such problems are either absent or diminished, result in the production of gels in more massive form.

GB 733987 discloses a process for the reduction of polyethylene to pulverulent form, wherein pieces of polyethylene are swelled in a solvent, mixture of solvents or emulsion thereof at a temperature below that
10 at which the polyethylene dissolves and is then comminuted by mechanical treatment.

According to the present invention, there is provided a process for the preparation of a particulate hydrogel of a homo- or copolymer which can exhibit syneresis, which process comprises contacting the hydrogel with a swelling agent; comminuting the swollen hydrogel to particles by subjecting it to shear stress; and drying the swollen particulate hydrogel by varying its temperature so that it exhibits syneresis.
15 By the term "hydrogel" as used herein we mean a polymeric material which is swellable by, rather than soluble in, an aqueous medium. Usually, but not necessarily, the polymeric material may be rendered swellable by being chemically cross-linked. It may instead, either in the case of high molecular weight material, be trapped in an entanglement network, or be formed with hydrophobic blocks to give an amphipathic material.

20 In accordance with a particularly preferred feature of the invention the swelling agent comprises water, optionally in admixture with one or more other polar liquids, for example C₁ to C₄ alkanols such as ethanol. From the standpoint of cheapness and availability, however, it is preferred that the hydrogel is swollen with a swelling agent which consists essentially of water, except where the hydrogel is readily hydrolysable in aqueous media. It is to be noted, however, that hydrogels can also be swollen by non-aqueous solvents,
25 especially non-aqueous polar solvents: for example, chloroform.

Suitably, the hydrogel comprises a hydrophilic homo- or copolymer comprising residues derivable from at least one of the following monomer classes:

- (a) (meth)acrylic acid, (meth)acrylamide or an unsubstituted or hydroxy-substituted ethyl or propyl(meth)acrylate, or a poly(oxyethylene)ester of (meth)acrylic acid;
- 30 (b) a substituted or unsubstituted cyclic mono or poly ether having from 3 to 6 ring atoms or cyclic imine having 3 ring atoms; or
- (c) a substituted or unsubstituted vinyl alcohol, aldehyde, ether, acetal, ketone, ester or substituted or unsubstituted *N*-vinyl heterocyclic compound.

By "(meth)acryl" we mean herein "methacryl" or "acryl" or a copolymer comprising both.

35 Monomers in class (b) include epoxides such as ethylene oxide, propylene oxide, 1,2-epoxybutane, 2,3-epoxybutane, glycidyl ethers, *N*-(epoxy substituted) heterocyclic compounds such as *N*-(2,3-epoxypropyl)-pyrrolidone; epihalohydrins, while not themselves cyclic ethers, do give homo- and copolymers derivable therefrom: examples include epifluorohydrin, epichlorohydrin and epibromohydrin. Other cyclic mono- or poly ethers include oxetane, tetrahydrofuran, dihydropyran, dioxolane and trioxane.
40 Homo- and copolymers derivable therefrom include partially C₁ to C₄ alkyl etherified celluloses and starches, homo- and co-poly(alkylene oxides) which may be cross-linked through reaction with isocyanate or unsaturated cyclic ether groups such as polyoxymethylene, polyethylene glycols and polypropylene glycols, and polyesters thereof with dicarboxylate acids such as maleic acid.

Monomers in class (c) include methyl and ethyl vinyl ether, methyl vinyl ketone, methallyl alcohol,
45 *N*-vinyl pyrrolidone, *N*-vinyl carbazole, *N*-vinyl pyridine, *N*-vinyl oxazole, *N*-vinyl methyloxazolidone, vinyl formal, vinyl butyral, vinyl methoxyacetal. Homo- and copolymers derivable therefrom include polyvinyl acetate and polyvinyl alcohol.

Examples of homo- or copolymers which exhibit syneresis include homo- and co(polyethylene oxide) and the process of the present invention is particularly suited to poly(ethylene oxide). By the term
50 "syneresis" as used herein we mean the spontaneous exudation of at least some of the swelling agent from the swollen hydrogel which results when the temperature of the swollen hydrogel is varied. In the case of homo- and co(polyethylene oxide) swollen with aqueous solvents and some non-aqueous solvents (for example formamide and acetic acid) syneresis occurs as the temperature is raised while for such polymers swollen with non-aqueous solvents syneresis in general occurs as the temperature is lowered.

55 It is found that the process of the present invention provides particulate hydrogels of average particle size typically from 0.05 mm to 7 mm, preferably from 0.1 mm to 5 mm, of narrow particle size distribution substantially free from "fines", and that a very precise degree of control over the average particle size may be attained by appropriate regulation of one or more of the following parameters;

- (a) the composition of the hydrogel;
- 60 (b) the composition of the swelling agent;
- (c) the temperature at which the swollen hydrogel is subjected to shear stress;
- (d) the rate of shear;
- (e) the shear power;
- (f) the nature and configuration of the shear means; and
- 65 (g) the duration of shear.

With regard to (a), the hydrogel composition is usually dictated by the application to which the hydrogel is put. However, a relative increase (in the case of a hydrogel copolymer) in the amount of a hydrophobic component or of chemical cross-linking, will reduce the amount of swelling caused by contact with an aqueous medium and, for a given set of parameters (b) to (g), will increase the average particle size of the sheared, swollen hydrogel. The converse will also apply.

With regard to (b) the composition of the swelling agent will, for a given set of parameters (a) and (c) to (g), control the degree of swelling and the average particle size of the sheared, swollen hydrogel. For example, a relative increase (in the case of a hydrogel polymer) in the amount of C₃ or C₄ alkanol in an aqueous swelling agent will decrease the amount of swelling and increase the average particle size of the sheared, swollen hydrogel. However, by contrast an ethanol/water mixture approximating to 1:1 by weight composition will somewhat increase the amount of swelling, relative to water as the swelling agent, and decrease the average particle size of the sheared, swollen hydrogel. Where (a) is such that the hydrogel is sensitive to hydrolysis or alcoholysis, for example by being hydrolysable in aqueous media, then it may be swollen by any suitable non-aqueous swelling agent, for example chloroform. The hydrogel may also be swollen with any suitable non-aqueous swelling agent and then sheared in aqueous media. Non-aqueous swelling agents can often provide greater swelling (for example, chloroform provides a ten-fold swelling relative to the dry weight, whereas water provides a four-fold swelling of poly(ethylene oxide) of equivalent weight about 3,500 at 37°C) and thus a relatively smaller particle size after shearing and drying.

With regard to (c), where the swollen hydrogel exhibits syneresis as the temperature is raised, in the case of homo- and co(polyethylene oxides) swollen in aqueous media, the regulation of the temperature at which the swollen hydrogel is subjected to shear stress to effect syneresis will result in a less swollen hydrogel and, for a given set of parameters (a), (b), (d), (e) and (f), will increase the average dried particle size of the sheared, swollen hydrogel. The converse will also apply. This is a particularly preferred feature of this invention.

The shear may suitably be provided by an industrial mincer or blender, such as a Waring Blender; it is often convenient first to effect a coarse comminution followed by a fine comminution to specification.

Thereafter, the swollen particulate hydrogel may be dried, optionally after impregnating with active substance which, where convenient, may be incorporated in the swelling agent.

In the case of hydrogels comprising homo- and co-poly (ethylene oxide) swollen in aqueous media, which exhibit syneresis at elevated temperatures, an initial drying stage may comprise contacting the swollen, sheared hydrogel with hot water, for example at a temperature from 90° to 100°C. The resulting syneresis will result in a reduction of the water content of the hydrogel the drying of which, if desired, can be completed after filtration by contact with a warm fluid current such as warm air.

In the case of hydrogels comprising homo- and co-poly (ethylene oxide) having an equivalent weight greater than about 1,400 but swollen in non-aqueous media, which exhibit syneresis at reduced temperatures, an initial drying stage may comprise cooling the swollen, sheared gel, for example to a temperature from -25°C to -25°C, preferably -20°C to 0°C whereupon the hydrogel crystallises and the swelling agent is exuded.

The particulate hydrogels prepared by the process of this invention may be used in numerous applications. For example, they may be used as absorbents in diapers, tampons, incontinence pads and wound dressings; as gelling agents for containing aqueous media: for example, in bedpans or in incontinence bags where the aqueous medium is urine; as carriers, excipients and delivery mechanisms for active substances: for example, fertilisers, nutrients, herbicides, pesticides, flavourants and drugs, as described in our Specifications GB 2047093, 2047094 and EP 0000291 and, in particular, in encapsulated controlled release orally-administered dosage forms; as soil conditioners; as humectants: for example in dried foods, tobacco, tea or coffee; and as extractive agents, as described in our Complete Specification GB 1573201.

In the Specification accompanying our co-pending application GB 2108517 we have described a hydrogel, suitable as a wound dressing agent and in the preparation of a controlled release composition comprising an active substance, which comprises polymerised moieties derivable from (i) at least one polymerisable cyclic (thio) ether and from (ii) at least one hydrophilic homo- or copolymer.

The process of this invention is particularly useful in preparing such hydrogels for use in such inventions.

In particular, the process of this invention, when practised on hydrogels comprising poly(ethylene oxide) moieties cross-linked through reaction with unsaturated cyclic ethers, such as acrolein tetramer, produces fine powders (with a mean diameter from 0.1 mm to 0.2 mm) very effectively with a short period of comminution in a Waring Blender.

In the case of hydrogels comprising poly(ethylene oxide) moieties cross-linked through reaction with isocyanates, such as an aliphatic diisocyanate, the effectiveness of comminution may be increased by foaming by the accidental or deliberate presence of a pneumatogen. This may comprise a small amount (typically less than 1% of reactants) of (i) water (which reacts in known manner with an isocyanate group to form carbon dioxide, the effective blowing agent, and an amine group which latter reacts with further isocyanate to form a urea group); (ii) an inert low boiling liquid (such as a halogenated, for example a chlorofluorinated hydrocarbon such as freon); or (iii) a solid pneumatogen which decomposes on heating, for example a bicarbonate.

The process of the present invention is particularly advantageous in that the energy investment of comminution is low. The product is also formed in a particularly clean state for medical applications. In comparative tests, colourless unswollen hydrogel was comminuted by cryogenic grinding. A powder of broad particle size distribution was formed of grey or brown colour caused by metallic or other inclusions from the grinding mill. (Cryogenic grinding is also expensive). The product produced by the process of this invention is a clear white powder of narrow particle size distribution with concomitant reduction in waste from material which is out of specification, or in energy investment in a classification process. The dried product, while free-flowing, does not impart slip to surfaces onto which it is poured, unlike certain presently available powders, comprising spherical particles. Furthermore, the swelling process enables free oligomeric and monomeric material to become extracted simultaneously.

On occasion, flocs of very fine (0.05 mm to 0.2 mm) particles can form on drying. This can be overcome by dry ball-milling.

The invention will now be further illustrated, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawing, in which:

Figure 1 represents a diagrammatic flow-chart of the complete process; and

Figure 2 represents a diagrammatic detailed view of a drying embodiment.

In the drawing, a poly(ethylene oxide) hydrogel is manufactured by bulk polymerisation in reactor 1. The hydrogel is conveyed to a swelling tank 2 where it is contacted in massive form overnight with water or a non-aqueous swelling agent becoming swollen thereby. The swollen hydrogel together with excess water or non-aqueous swelling agent is then passed through a heat exchanger 3 in which it is brought to the particular temperature which will give the desired particle size after comminution in a coarse reduction stage 4 and a fine reduction stage 5. The comminuted slurry is next conveyed through a heat exchanger 6 in which it is heated to 100°C or cooled to -25°C to effect syneresis of water or non-aqueous swelling agent from the swollen hydrogel. (The heat exchanger fluid exiting from 6 in the case where 6 is at 100°C may be pumped in closed circuit to 3). The less swollen hydrogel leaving 6 is then dried to a free-flowing powder in a continuous drier 7 and next passed through a screening station 8 to give a comminuted product of specified particle size distribution.

In the particular embodiment shown in Figure 2, the comminuted slurry leaving 5 is gravity fed by a guide 9 in 6 onto a moving endless belt 10. Water at 100°C enters 6 at point 11 and cooler water leaves at point 12. The less swollen hydrogel leaving 6 is then gravity fed into 7 where it meets a vibrating screen 13 of specified mesh size. Screened hydrogel passes through to a static retaining mesh 14 while excess water is removed under tension through line 15. The screened hydrogel is continually drained dry and next further dried by the passage of warm air through line 16. The dried hydrogel is finally air veyed through line 17 to a fabricating station (not shown).

The following Examples illustrate the invention. In such case the hydrogel was fully swollen before comminution. Gel particle sizes refer to the dry particle; mesh sizes refer to the mesh presented to the swollen polymer feedstock which is to be comminuted.

Hydrogel particles were dried first by treating with boiling water for one minute on a vacuum filter on which they were then allowed to dry in air. Next they were fully dried using a through circulation air drier at 100°C.

Dried hydrogel particles were sized using brass sieves in accordance with British Standard BS410/43.

Example 1

A polyethylene oxide hydrogel cross-linked through urethane groups was first made by reacting poly(ethylene oxide) ($\bar{M}_n=8307$) with 1,2,6-hexanetriol and Hylene W (bis-(4'isocyanatocyclohexyl)methane) in the molar ratio 4:3:8.5 essentially as described in Example 1 of our Specification GB 2047093.

A swelling curve (which gives an indication of the extent of swelling and the time taken to attain this) for the hydrogel was then obtained by plotting water ratio against time at a constant ambient temperature of 20°C. (The water ratio is the ratio of the weight of water absorbed by the polymer at that temperature to the dry weight of polymer.) In the present case the equilibrium water ratio was found to be 3.5 and was attained after 6 hours (average of 3 samples).

Samples of the swollen hydrogel were next liquidised in a domestic liquidiser (Kenwood "Chef") for differing lengths of time, but at constant liquidising shear (13,500 rpm) volume and weight ratio of polymer:ice:water (1:1:1). Groups of 5 samples were each liquidised for 1, 3, 5, 7 and 10 minutes making a total of 25 experimental runs: see Table 1. It was found that as the time of shear increased the percentage of sample weight remaining as coarse particles (that is, with a mean diameter greater than 1 mm) decreased with a concomitant increase in the amount of finer particles. It was also found that for shear times of 1 and 3 minutes the fraction which comprised the greatest percentage of sample weight was, in all cases, coarse; but that for a shear time of 5 and 7 minutes it was the fraction <1003 μ but >699 μ and for a shear time of 10 minutes it was the fraction <699 μ but >500 μ .

These results indicate the desirability of increasing shear time to obtain increased amounts of finer particles.

Example 2

Samples of swollen hydrogel, prepared as described in Example 1, were liquidised in the same liquidiser at different blade speeds but at constant liquidising times (1 min.), volume and weight ratio of polymer:ice:water (1:1:1). Groups of 5 samples were each liquidised at blade speeds of 4,000; 5,500; 8,000; 10,500 and 13,500 rpm making a total of 25 experimental runs: see Table 2. It was found that as the blade speed increased the percentage of sample weight remaining as coarse particles (that is, in this instance, with a mean diameter greater than 2.4 mm) decreased with a concomitant increase in the amount of finer particles. At the three highest blade speeds the fraction which comprised the greatest percentage (the percentage increasing with blade speed) of sample weight was, in each case, the fraction <1405 μ but >1003 μ . At the highest blade speed this fraction comprised about 35% by weight of the sample and more than 50% by weight was under 2000 μ .

These results indicate the desirability of increasing shear to obtain increased amounts of finer particles.

Example 3

Samples of swollen hydrogel, prepared as described in Example 1, were liquidised in the same liquidiser at different weight ratios of polymer:ice:water but at constant liquidising times (10 minutes), shear (13,500 rpm) and volume. A sample was liquidised at each of the polymer:water:ice weight ratios 4:1:1, 3:1:1, 2:1:1 and 1:1:1 making a total of 4 experimental runs: see Table 3. It was found that as the ratio increased an optimum value, at about 3:1:1, was reached at which the percentage of sample weight converted to fine particles was greatest. The 3:1:1 sample gave approximately 60% by weight of the sample in the fraction <600 μ but >500 μ whereas the 4:1:1 sample gave approximately 60% by weight of the sample in the fraction <1003 μ but >599 μ .

The other two samples gave a high percentage of sample >1003 μ with a poor yield of small particles. These results indicate the desirability of using a high polymer:water:ice ratio but not one so high that the viscosity of the resulting mix reduces the shear (as was believed to be the case at 4:1:1).

Example 4

Samples of swollen hydrogel of different volume, prepared as described in Example 1, were liquidised in the same liquidiser at constant liquidising times (10 minutes), shear (13,500 rpm) and weight ratio of polymer:ice:water (2:1:1) to ascertain whether any "scale-up" effect existed. Samples which had the volume of an equilibrated weight of polymer of 363, 487, 603 and 823 g, respectively, were each liquidised in a total of 4 experimental runs. It was found that as the volume of the sample increased the percentage of sample weight remaining as coarse particles (that is, with a mean diameter greater than 1 mm.) also increased. However, the corresponding decrease in the amount of finer particles at any given fraction was not great. For example, the fraction <600 μ but >500 μ comprised about 38%, 36%, 31% and 27% of the sample weight for the 363, 487, 603 and 823 g samples, respectively.

Accordingly, these results indicate that it may be more economical to use larger volume samples: while the percentage of sample weight yielded as fine particles will be smaller the actual weight of fine particles produced in unit time will be greater.

Example 5

In this Example fractions from previous liquidising treatments, as feedstock, were extruded through a domestic mincer (Kenwood "Chef") modified by interposing a wire mesh between the supplied plates so as to obtain different mesh sizes. Results are shown in Table 5. These indicate that the several meshes did function to reduce a major amount of each feedstock below the mesh size; however, at small mesh sizes it appears that flocculation may occur. It is also possible that syneresis of the polymer occurs, due to heating, not only making it more difficult to comminute but also, thereafter, less able to dry down to the expected size.

Example 6

A polyethylene oxide hydrogel crosslinked through reaction with unsaturated cyclic ether groups was made by reacting 550 g polyethylene glycol ($\bar{M}_n=7000$) with 21.06 g 1,2,6-hexane triol and 126.68 g acrolein tetramer, 3,4-dihydro-2H pyran-2 methyl-(3,4-dihydro-2H pyran-2 carboxylate). The reactants differed from stoichiometric molar ratio of 1:2:4 by the use of 80% excess of acrolein tetramer. The reaction was initiated by the addition of 0.7 g anhydrous ferric chloride, i.e. 0.1% by weight of the reactants.

The ferric chloride catalyst was dissolved in the triol at 90°; the dihydropyran and the moisture-free molten polyethylene glycol were then added and the reactants thoroughly mixed. The hydrogel formed very rapidly and polymerisation was completed by curing for four hours at 90°.

The fully swollen hydrogel was mixed with its own weight of water and liquidised in a domestic liquidiser (Kenwood Chef) for 10 minutes at 13,500 rpm. The hydrogel particles were filtered off, treated with boiling water and then by through circulation warmed air.

The dried particles were sized by sieving to show a typical distribution of:

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Particle size (microns):	<420;	420—500;	500—699;	699—1400;	>1400
% by weight	19;	13;	12;	39;	17

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The particles were aggregated and could readily be reduced by further processing, for example light manual grinding with a mortar and pestle of particles larger than 420 microns reduced their size below this level.

10 The fine powder absorbs water very readily; 13.5 ml of water were absorbed by pouring from a measuring cylinder on to 3 g of the dry hydrogel, a water to dry powder ratio of 4.5.

Example 7

A hydrogel was prepared as described in Example 1 using 67.8 g of polyethylene glycol ($\bar{M}_n=7000$) 2.60 g of 1,2,6-hexane triol and 10.42 g of acrolein tetramer, i.e. 20% excess of the dihydropyran.

15 The hydrogel tended to disintegrate on swelling in water and readily comminuted with shearing. Thus, liquidising a 50, 50 mixture of water and swollen gel for 20 minutes at maximum speed in a Kenwood Chef produced a frothy dispersion of very fine particles, estimated by optical microscopy to be in the 100 micron range. A slightly coarser dispersion made by liquidising at maximum speed for five minutes was filtered to give a filter cake of small discrete particles aggregated together to form a tough horn-like material.

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TABLE 1

	1	3	5	7	10	Particle sizes		Weight percentages				
						Mesh No.	μ	1 min samp.	3 min samp.	5 min samp.	7 min samp.	10 min samp.
Time of liquidising (mins)												
weight of polymer/gms	82.719	82.392	82.003	82.164	82.446	rough	>1003	76.27	41.50	20.84	16.93	8.96
weight of ice/gms	81.857	81.858	82.039	82.284	81.027	16 mesh	<1003 but >699	18.60	43.32	43.12	50.83	36.84
weight of water/gms	83.463	82.573	82.679	82.107	82.181	22 mesh	<699 but >500	4.30	12.85	26.70	25.13	38.02
weight of dried polymer/gms	14.406	12.314	12.037	11.645	11.376	30 mesh	<500 but >422	0.46	1.28	4.40	3.40	6.94
						36 mesh	<422	0.36	1.04	5.00	3.71	9.24

TABLE 2

Speed of blades Rev/Min	4000	5500	8000	10500	13500	Particle sizes		Weight percentages				
						Mesh No.	μ	4000 rev/ min	5500 rev/ min	8000 rev/ min	10500 rev/ min	13500 rev/ min
setting on control	1	3	5	7	Max	rough	>2411	60.08	55.97	12.11	24.60	15.06
wt. of polymer/gms	82.104	81.740	82.172	82.774	82.013	7 mesh	<2411 but >1676	29.30	29.84	21.99	22.02	12.92
wt. of ice/gms	82.938	81.740	82.706	82.113	82.218	10 mesh	<1676 but >1405	5.72	6.99	23.30	18.49	19.69
wt. of water/gms	82.062	85.846	82.001	82.182	82.945	12 mesh	<1405 but >1003	3.79	5.87	30.72	25.42	34.54
wt. of wet polymer/gms	78.456	54.376	85.974	80.914	77.796	16 mesh	<1003 but >699	0.85	1.04	8.90	5.43	12.73
wt. of hot water dried/gms	63.597	45.266	50.640	65.214	65.292	22 mesh	<699	0.26	0.28	2.98	4.02	5.06
% wt. loss due to H.W.	18.94	16.75	41.10	19.40	16.07							
wt. of dry polymer/gms	13.100	12.304	11.886	1.384	12.665							

TABLE 3

Polymer:ice:water ratio	1:1:1	2:1:1	3:1:1	4:1:1	Particle sizes		Weight percentages			
					Mesh No.	μ	1:1:1	2:1:1	3:1:1	4:1:1
wt. of polymer/gms	59.433	119.413	179.693	239.964	rough	>1003	23.19	15.38	0.52	0.55
wt. of ice/gms	59.436	59.098	60.541	60.838	16 mesh	<1003 but >699	43.52	29.98	6.09	30.92
wt. of water/gms	59.350	59.573	60.124	60.898	22 mesh	<699 but >599	15.47	21.85	30.66	31.09
wt. of wet polymer/gms	60.378	60.78	143.323	211.374	25 mesh	<599 but >500	8.76	15.50	30.76	19.24
wt. of hot water dried/gms	39.475	51.78	121.131	207.097	30 mesh	<500 but >422	3.93	7.10	17.14	8.29
% wt. loss due to H.W.	34.62	14.81	15.51	2.02	36 mesh	<422 but >251	4.69	9.11	13.88	9.28
wt. of dry polymer/gms	9.038	18.027	26.419	38.073	60 mesh	<251 but >211	0.22	0.57	0.49	0.33
					72 mesh	<211 but >178	0.17	0.35	0.35	0.22
					85 mesh	<178	0.05	0.16	0.11	0.09

TABLE 4

	Total volume/gms	362.991	486.935	603.232	822.626	Particle sizes		Weight percentages			
						Mesh No.	μ	363 gms	487 gms	603 gms	823 gms
wt. of polymer/gms		180.551	240.782	302.274	399.955	rough	>1003	4.94	4.90	7.73	4.85
wt. of ice/gms		91.992	119.832	149.691	222.175	16 mesh	<1003 but >699	11.43	17.84	30.30	43.22
wt. of water/gms		90.448	120.321	151.267	200.496	22 mesh	<699 but >599	38.38	35.54	31.29	27.39
wt. of wet polymer/gms		168.694	206.216	331.574	449.467	25 mesh	<599 but >500	21.57	21.06	16.48	13.21
wt. of H.W. drying/gms		116.464	143.158	263.163	374.417	30 mesh	<500 but >422	9.99	9.25	6.54	5.12
% wt. loss due to H.W.		30.96	30.58	20.51	16.70	36 mesh	<422 but >251	12.77	10.80	7.17	5.69
wt. of dry polymer/gms		27.332	34.214	51.434	63.408	60 mesh	<251 but >211	0.56	0.41	0.23	0.25
						72 mesh	<211	0.36	0.34	0.27	0.25

TABLE 5

Sample	Feedstock fraction	Mesh	Product mode ptcle. size	Throughput (g min ⁻¹ cm ⁻²)	Percentage (best) by weight feedstock not exceeding mode ptcle. size
1	>1000 μ	910 μ	600 μ	1.806	50
2	<1000 μ but >700 μ	910 μ	600 μ	3.671	
3	<750 μ but >450 μ	910 μ	600 μ	3.970	
4	>1000 μ	580 μ	422 μ	0.883	60
5	<1000 μ but >700 μ	580 μ	422 μ	2.078	
6	<750 μ but >450 μ	580 μ	422 μ	1.542	
7	>1000 μ	320 μ	400 μ *	0.155	<50
8	<1000 μ but >700 μ	320 μ	400 μ	0.168	
9	<750 μ but >450 μ	320 μ	400 μ	0.137	
10	>1000 μ	180 μ	124 μ	0.011	<50
11	<1000 μ but >700 μ	180 μ	124 μ	0.018	
12	<750 μ but >450 μ	180 μ	124 μ	0.016	

* believed due to flocculation

Claims

1. A process for the preparation of a particulate gel, which process comprises contacting the gel with a swelling agent and comminuting the swollen gel to particles by subjecting it to shear stress characterised in that the gel is a hydrogel of a homo- or copolymer which can exhibit syneresis and in that the swollen particulate hydrogel is dried by varying its temperature so that it exhibits syneresis.
2. A process according to claim 1 wherein the swelling agent comprises water.
3. A process according to claim 2 wherein the swelling agent consists essentially of water.
4. A process according to claim 2 or 3 wherein the hydrogel comprises a hydrophilic homo- or copolymer comprising residues derivable from at least one of the following monomer classes:
 - (a) (meth)acrylic acid, (meth)acrylamide or an unsubstituted or hydroxy-substituted ethyl or propyl(meth)acrylate or a poly(oxyethylene) ester of (meth)acrylic acid;
 - (b) a substituted or unsubstituted cyclic mono or poly ether having from 3 to 6 ring atoms or cyclic imine having 3 ring atoms; or
 - (c) a substituted or unsubstituted vinyl alcohol, aldehyde ether, acetal, ketone, ester or substituted or unsubstituted N-vinyl heterocyclic compound.
5. A process according to any preceding claim wherein the hydrogel comprises a homo- or copoly(alkylene oxide).
6. A process according to claim 5 wherein the poly(alkylene oxide) is cross-linked through reaction with isocyanate or unsaturated cyclic ether groups.
7. A process according to claim 5 or 6 wherein the hydrogel comprises a poly(ethylene oxide).
8. A process according to any preceding claim wherein fertiliser, nutrient, herbicide, pesticide, flavourant or drug is incorporated in the swelling agent.

Patentansprüche

1. Verfahren zur Herstellung eines teilchenförmigen Gels, wobei das Gel mit einem Quellmittel in Kontakt gebracht und das gequollene Gel zu Teilchen zerkleinert wird, indem es einer Scherbeanspruchung unterworfen wird, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Gel ein Hydrogel eines Homo- oder Copolymeren ist, das Synärese zeigen kann und daß das gequollene, teilchenförmige Hydrogel getrocknet wird, indem seine Temperatur so geändert wird, daß es Synärese zeigt.
2. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Quellmittel Wasser enthält.
3. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Quellmittel im wesentlichen aus Wasser besteht.
4. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2 oder 3, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Hydrogel ein hydrophiles Homo- oder Copolymeres enthält, das Reste aufweist, die von wenigstens einer der folgenden Monomerklassen stammen:
 - (a) (Meth)Acrylsäure, (Meth)Acrylamid oder einem unsubstituierten oder hydroxy-substituierten Ethyl- oder Propyl(meth)acrylat oder einem Poly(oxyethylen) ester von (Meth)Acrylsäure;
 - (b) einem substituierten oder unsubstituierten cyclischen Mono- oder Polyäther mit 3 bis 6 Ringatomen oder einem cyclischen Imin mit 3 Ringatomen; oder
 - (c) einem substituierten oder unsubstituierten Vinylalkohol, Aldihydäther, Acetal, Keton, Ester oder einer substituierten oder unsubstituierten N-Vinyl-heterocyclischen Verbindung.
5. Verfahren nach einem der vorhergehenden Ansprüche, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Hydrogel ein Homo- oder Copoly(alkylenoxid) aufweist.
6. Verfahren nach Anspruch 5, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Poly(alkylenoxid) durch Umsetzung mit Isocyanat oder Gruppen von ungesättigten cyclischen Äthern vernetzt ist.
7. Verfahren nach Anspruch 5 oder 6, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Hydrogel ein Poly(äthylenoxid) aufweist.
8. Verfahren nach einem der vorhergehenden Ansprüche, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß Düngemittel, Nährstoffe, Herbizide, Pestizide, Aromen oder Arzneimittel in das Quellmittel eingebracht sind.

Revendications

1. Procédé pour préparer un gel en particules, ce procédé comprenant la mise du gel en contact avec un agent de gonflement et la fragmentation du gel gonflé pour obtenir des particules en soumettant ce gel à une contrainte de cisaillement, procédé caractérisé en ce que le gel est un hydrogel d'un homopolymère ou copolymère pouvant présenter de la synérèse, et en ce que l'on sèche l'hydrogel en particules gonflées en faisant varier sa température de manière qu'il présente de la synérèse.
2. Procédé selon la revendication 1, dans lequel l'agent de gonflement est ou comprend de l'eau.
3. Procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel l'agent de gonflement consiste essentiellement en de l'eau.
4. Procédé selon la revendication 2 ou 3, dans lequel l'hydrogel comprend un homopolymère ou copolymère hydrophile comprenant des restes pouvant provenir d'au moins l'une des classes suivantes de monomères:

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(a) l'acide (meth)acrylique, le (meth)acrylamide ou un (meth)acrylate d'éthyle ou de propyle non substitué ou substitué par des groupes hydroxyles ou un ester de poly(oxyéthylène) de l'acide (meth)acrylique;

5 (b) un monoéther ou polyéther cyclique, substitué ou non substitué, comportant 3 à 6 atomes par cycle ou une imine cyclique comportant 3 atomes par cycle; ou

(c) un alcool, aldéhyde, éther, acétal, cétone, ester vinylique substitué ou non substitué ou un composé hétérocyclique de type N-vinyle substitué ou non-substitué.

5. Procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications précédentes, dans lequel l'hydrogel comprend un homo ou copoly(oxyde d'alkylène).

10 6. Procédé selon la revendication 5, dans lequel le poly(oxyde d'alkylène) est réticulé par réaction avec un isocyanate ou des groupes éther cyliques insaturés.

7. Procédé selon la revendication 5 ou 6, dans lequel l'hydrogel est ou comprend un poly(oxyde d'éthylène).

8. Procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications précédentes dans lequel on incorpore un engrais, une matière nutritive, un herbicide, un pesticide, un agent d'aromatisation ou un médicament à l'agent de gonflement.

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